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To cite this article: Dip Kapoor (2018): Research as knowledge democratization, mobilization and social action: pushing back on casteism in contexts of caste humiliation and social reproduction in schools in India, Educational Action Research, DOI: [10.1080/09650792.2018.1538894](https://doi.org/10.1080/09650792.2018.1538894)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/09650792.2018.1538894>



Published online: 29 Oct 2018.



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Research as knowledge democratization, mobilization and social action: pushing back on casteism in contexts of caste humiliation and social reproduction in schools in India

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ABSTRACT

Dalit (the 'downtrodden') students continue to experience caste-based discrimination, humiliation and dehumanization; illegal practices that are being reproduced in the school system in the state of Odisha, India. Based on a research study organized by the Center for Research and Development Solidarity, an adivasi (original dweller/Scheduled Tribe)-dalit (Scheduled Caste) research organization and 401 dalit students in grades 6–10 attending 16 government schools in a 25-village zone, this paper elaborates on this research initiative. It demonstrates how knowledge democratization, both, as research undertaken *with and for* dalit students as producers of (caste-resistance) knowledge and as knowledge sharing as mobilization, can simultaneously mobilize wider circles of organized collective action with parents, Village Education Committees (VECs) and local dalit NGOs and movements to address casteism and untouchability in state schools. The paper concludes with some brief insights pertaining to academic and funded research as knowledge democracy and mobilization for social action that are emergent from this caste research and related research and social action addressing land-forest-labour assertions in South Odisha.

ARTICLE HISTORY

Received 25 June 2018

Accepted 12 October 2018

KEYWORDS

Caste discrimination; schools; education and social reproduction; knowledge democracy; social action; knowledge mobilization

Introduction

Research as knowledge democratization and mobilization for social action has always defined Indigenous Research/Methodologies (Chilisa 2011; Smith 1999; Smith, Tuck, and Yang 2018; Trask 1993; Weber-Pillwax 2009) in contexts of colonial dispossession and oppression, 'Third-Worldist' participatory action research (PAR) (Fals Borda 1979, 1991; Fals Borda and Rahman 1991; Freire 1970, 1974; Hall, Gillette, and Tandon 1982) and its contemporary variants (Kapoor and Jordan 2009a; Kapoor 2009b) in the neo/colonies or activist research engaging exploited (migrant) labouring classes with the continued expansion and penetration of colonial capitalist social relations (Choudry and Kuyek 2012; Choudry & Kapoor 2010/13). These research engagements have not only been predicated on doing research *with* people but *for* people and social movements and struggles engaged in anticolonial and/or a working-class labour politics vis-à-vis capital, i.e., anti/counter-hegemonic research engagements which in different ways, continue to

challenge colonial capitalist ruling relations, including complicit processes of knowledge production and research (Hall 1979; Jordan 2003; Jordan and Kapoor 2016; Kapoor 2009b; Smith 2005).

This paper takes up the current and repeated call for knowledge democracy, mobilization and action research in Educational Action Research (Rowell 2017, 2018; Rowell and Hong 2017) including the broader need for 'dialogue between the monoculture of scientific knowledge and rigour and other knowledges, such as popular knowledge and indigenous knowledge' (Rowell 2017, 334). We also attend to the call for a direction for 'knowledge democracy' as 'the effort to link action research with grassroots social change for social justice' (Rowell 2018, 7). This is addressed by drawing on a current and ongoing funded research experience¹ pertaining to casteism (including untouchability) and push back in schools in India being undertaken with dalit (Scheduled Castes (SCs)) village-based researchers, students and parents. The idea for the research was proposed by the Center for Research and Development Solidarity (CRDS) which is affiliated with the Adivasi-Dalit Ektha Abhijan or EA movement of adivasi forest-dwellers and small/landless peasant and dalit migrant labour in the region.

After providing a brief introduction to the caste context in India and its social and educational implications, the paper draws upon this research experience in terms of its genesis, research-social action linkages and current and future social change endeavours to comment on knowledge democratization and mobilization (KMb). We also consider related possibilities and dilemmas for the same in relation to socio-educational research and social action and the academy (funded research) or what has been previously taken up in this context as 'participatory academic research' (academic par) and the demands of a 'People's Participatory Action Research' or PAR by adivasi-dalit social groups and emergent subaltern classes (Kapoor 2009b, 29).

These conversations are in relation to the pertinent observation that, quote,

"For action researchers, the intention associated with impact and value [academic/granting agency KMb criteria] has long been recognized as risky, with the stakes often very high in relation to the 'action' because the focus of change efforts is deeply entwined with difficult issues of social justice, oppression and empowerment ... it enables grassroots participants to become knowledge producers and to push back against dominant and monolithic knowledge validation systems" (Rowell 2017, 334) and unjust, exploitative and oppressive social structures, such as caste.

Caste contexts and social structures of discrimination, violence and inequality in Indian society and education

Caste, a Portuguese term from the Latin *castus*, meaning 'chaste' or 'pure', was a term for the Hindu social stratification system as understood by India's first modern European colonizers in the 16th century, the Portuguese, who saw it as a system for maintaining purity of blood akin to reproducing race and lineage. Understood and practiced as a system of hierarchical social segregation ascribed by descent and reproduced by endogamy, restricted contact (including *untouchability* practices along pollution-purity divides) and no prospects for mobility (Dube 1996; Paik 2014; Rao 2009), the Indian term for caste is *jati*; a system whose genesis is traceable to at least 600BC and later

codified by 200AD in the *Manusmriti* or the laws of Manu, the mythological ancient lawgiver of the Hindu social code. Hindu scripture also speaks of *varnas* (which include thousands of *jatis*) as *chaturvarna* or a four-varna hierarchical system consisting of *brahmins* (priestly castes), *kshatriyas* (warrior castes), *vaishyas* (traders) and *shudras* (agriculturalists, fishers, hunters, labour), together referred to as *savarnas*. *Avarnas* (outcastes) who were not considered a part of the caste/varna system included *adivasis* or original dwellers (referenced by the state as STs for ameliorative purposes) and ‘untouchables’ or dalits (or SCs) who were relegated to performing impure, unclean and polluting tasks such as removal of waste/sewage (including human excrement), tanning, butchery, tending to funeral pyres and labour generally addressing the unclean. Together, *avarnas* (outcastes) account for a third of the Indian population, roughly exceeding some 300 million people when taking into account the spread across South Asia (including all religions that caste has infiltrated), making them the fifth largest population in the world on country-wise rankings (Teltumbde 2011, 17).

The British introduced the term SCs in the eighteenth century and today the Constitutional Schedules (adopted in 1950 and prepared under the colonial India Act of 1935 which sanctioned enumeration of these communities) list over 1000 SC groupings, while Article 46 obligates the state to protect these groups from all kinds of exploitation and social injustice; Article 14 prohibits discrimination on the grounds of religion, race, caste, sex or place of birth; and Article 17 abolishes the practice of untouchability in any form. The Prevention of Atrocities Act (1989) and the Rules (1995) were enacted to carry out this Constitutional mandate including state-sanctioned ameliorative measures (e.g. reservations in education and state-sector employment) to address SC subordinate status in Indian society.

Despite these measures, based on National Sample Survey Organization (55th round) data, sociologists have concluded that ‘caste continues to be a major fault line of economic inequality in contemporary India’ and that ‘caste inequality has been flourishing in rural and especially urban India’ (Deshpande 2003, 116), noting that ‘we have to face up to the uncomfortable truth that caste inequality has been and is being reproduced in independent India’ (120). Others note that ‘its viciousness appears to have increased in recent years, notably during the post-1990s neoliberal phase’ (Teltumbde, 2011, 17), despite ‘the Constitution and its pioneering provisions [championed by the “respected father” of dalits and dalit Constitutional architect, Bhimrao Ramji Ambedkar, 1891–1956], in favour of SCs and STs, wherein dalits today are represented in Indian public life almost everywhere’ (25) while continuing to face discrimination and caste-based untouchability as humiliation (Guru 2011). P.V. Sainath’s research (1996) tracing the situation of dalits in Rajasthan suggested back then that on average a dalit woman is raped every 60 hours while a dalit is murdered every nine days which is in keeping with caste violence (crimes against SCs) noted by Anand Teltumbde (2011, 81) wherein he concludes that crimes against dalits are committed every 18 minutes (based on 2004–2008 National Crime Record Bureau statistics) (87), while his coverage of the Khairlanji murders in Maharashtra in 2006 prompted him to refer to the ‘persistence of caste’ and ‘Khairlanji’ as ‘India’s hidden apartheid’.

An Action Aid survey in 565 villages across 11 states revealed the extent of untouchability practices still prevalent in rural India including the fact that in 73% of the survey villages, dalits could not enter non-dalit homes; 70% could not eat with non-dalits; and in

38% of the villages, dalit children ate separately in school during the midday meal (Shah et al. 2006, 65). A 2010 study conducted by the Navsarjan Trust and the John F. Kennedy Center for Human Rights & Justice across 1589 villages in the state of Gujarat found 53% practicing segregated seating during midday meals in schools while exposing 98 types of untouchability practiced against dalits. 98% of respondents claimed that they kept separate utensils at home to serve food/drink to dalits while the same number would not rent a house to a dalit in a non-dalit neighbourhood (JFK-Navsarjan report, 2010, 19).

Initial studies on caste discrimination and education pointed out discrimination against SC villages and settlements in terms of: (a) the location of schools (mostly exceed the stated 1–3 km distance/access stipulation as compared with access for other castes; (b) teachers refusing to teach SC children; (c) children from particular castes being special targets of verbal abuse and physical punishment by teachers; and (d) low-caste children frequently being beaten by upper caste classmates (Dreze and Gazdar 1996). Other studies point out that only 46% (as compared to 61%) of dalit girls in the 5–14 year age group attend schools in rural areas with dropout rates of 67% at the elementary level and up to 70% and higher at the secondary level for all dalit students (Deshpande and Bapna 2008; Govinda 2002; Nambissan and Sedwal 2002; Velaskar 2005). Others have recently specified the singular importance of caste and gender as the basis of social discrimination and discrimination in education (as schooling) in particular (Paik 2014; Wankhede 2013). One of the few recent comparative case studies (urban-rural) on the schooling experience and caste discrimination conducted in the state of Rajasthan (Nambissan 2010), documents the experiences of dalit children in relation to water; classroom participation (segregation, silencing, co/curricular exclusions); gendered-caste discrimination; responsibilities and tasks in school; peer relations; teacher interaction; and supports. 'To the detriment of education in India, casteism and its prevalence in school education has not been acknowledged' (Sedwal and Kamat 2008, 37) while there is virtually no educational research work being done in relation to dalit responses and/or resistance pertaining to caste discrimination in schools (Nambissan and Rao 2013).

Researching casteism and untouchability in state schools: a brief history of non/funded PAR and social action in the region

The author's initial engagements with dalits and adivasis in the east coast state of Odisha were around doctoral research in the area three decades ago as an international (Indian) graduate student in education from the University of Alberta, Canada. On completion of the doctorate, a group of 10 dalits and adivasis who had participated in the research from various villages in the Gajapati district (Mohana Block), with formal schooling from a minimum of grade 10 and many years of experience working in the area with social movements/struggles and with civil society organizations, invited the author to join them in an initiative to form their own organization, VICALP (meaning 'alternative' in Oriya, the state language).

Formally established in 1995, VICALP became the adivasi-dalit vehicle for local organizing and popular education in Gajapati district, setting in motion a process whereby the Adivasi-Dalit EA (unity forum) or EA began to emerge as a local movement of predominantly Kondh-Saora adivasis and dalits (Panos) from this district. Today the EA operates in a core of 150 villages or 26,000 adivasis and dalits and a

wider movement constituency (with uneven organizational strength) of 516 villages or some 350,000 people.

The author's role, as a non-dalit/adivasi and a *savarna* urbanite then residing in Canada as an international student from India, was to support VICALP in its adult education and organizing work as a voluntary research associate and popular educator, an ongoing voluntary role that was formalized in 2006 when CRDS was established with the help of SSHRC-SRG funding. This role also included bringing in *outside knowledge* and providing assistance to VICALP-EA in securing *resource support* (for example, helping with reporting/grant writing & proposals, while sharing this knowledge with the team) to the extent possible, given that the author did not have a tenured academic position (academic status) at the time (1990s).

The author's eventual employment at a Canadian university in 2003 opened up an avenue for more focused conversations around the utility of this role for the EA process, including the role of formal academic research/grants and participatory action research (PAR) work. This resulted in a SSHRC-SRG in 2006 to support 'learning in adivasi social movements' as determined by and executed with VICALP-EA and eventually, the newly established CRDS (Kapoor 2009b). The grant helped support knowledge engagements that were of movement relevance to the VICALP-CRDS-EA process around land/forests. These included for example, documenting traditional histories/claims; developing knowledge regarding state land/forest classification schemes and related education concerning strategic openings for expanding ongoing mass 'occupations' of *anawadi* or vacant state land for the purposes of securing *pattas* or titles and non-commodifiable (dead capital) collective (commoning) claims. These knowledge engagements also stimulated wider anti-dispossession movement network organizing/knowledge collaborations in relation to dams, mines and state-corporate agroforestry (Kapoor 2016, 2017).

Anti-caste/untouchability work has always been a significant social and political endeavour for VICALP-EA as dalits are integral to the work of these organizations and the movement in Gajapati and the neighbouring regions in South Odisha (Prasant and Kapoor 2010/13). The every-day tangible experience of casteism/untouchability at a personal/village level prompted ongoing discussions regarding the need to address caste structures and humiliation at the source, one such location being the school. This galvanized CRDS and several villages (many organized under the Ganjam Zilla Bauri-Khodol Vikas Manch, a dalit movement in the area of interest) to help with developing a second SSHRC-IG application with the author pertaining to *Untouchability and Casteism in Rural Schools* with an eventual focus around responses and resistance to these daily incursions. The idea was to use the knowledge from the research and the research process itself (knowledge democratization and KMB as understood by these actors), to stimulate and build momentum for a wider and more organized push back against such practices in the region by VICALP-EA and other dalit movements (e.g. BVM) in the area of the schools. It would include local (dalit) NGOs in conjunction with students, parents and Village Education Committees (VECs) charged with a liaison role and related activities between government schools and students, parents and villages.

Research methodology and emergent understandings regarding caste in state schools: knowledge democracy, mobilization and social action with students, parents and VECs

A CRDS gender-balanced team of eight dalit community-based research assistants (RAs) and the author (as PI) formed the research team which had emerged at the proposal/grant application stage as the group developed the proposal for funding from the SSHRC-IG program together. CRDS worked with the BVM dalit movement in the Ganjam district to determine which dalit villages and related schools with mixed school populations of SCs and general/*savarna* castes (GCs) to approach, many of whom were also known to VICALP from cyclone relief work done in 2000. The cyclone-related experience had impressed itself on the collective memory of dalits in the locale given the conspicuous practices of caste/untouchability in duplicitous 'relief work' (e.g. caste-based prioritizations for supports and timing for supports) evident in what were GC-SC segregated proximate villages in the affected areas.

Having secured the grant and ethics approval from the University to commence work, early exchanges with identified villages began in 2014 with informal discussion circles in SC villages to determine initial willingness to engage with CRDS in a joint investigation in to caste (untouchability) discrimination and push back in schools. Local in/formal SC leaders or *bhalolok* (good people) (in GC villages, these leaders are referred to as *bhadrolok* or the *civilized*) would announce these visits and invite people to attend the gathering in the community hall if they were interested in discussing these issues with CRDS, VICALP and the BVM. An hour or so would transpire before a group of SC parents and students (it was made clear, as per formal ethical protocols but contrary to customary gathering of all villagers, that only students from grades 6–10 and their parents or other interested SC villagers were being invited to these gatherings) would assemble in the community hall. After sharing the rationale, punctuated with the historical and current experience of caste/untouchability in the area and the purpose of the study, the floor was opened to general discussion on caste experiences in schools with the view to determine key areas for detailed examination in and around school life/experiences. This also acted as an opportunity for initial galvanization and popular mobilization around the issues of caste. Parents and students shared experiences and made suggestions on what/where to look (e.g. the role of teachers in denigrating SC student ambitions). It was made clear (as per academic and ethical protocols) that these discussions were not being recorded and that participation was voluntary (not necessary). It was emphasized that the RA team was searching for the most useful points of focus for the study with their help and with the view to, both, develop and continually share this knowledge with the villages (including VECs), local dalit movements and dalit NGOs, who could then decide whether or not to take this up as a basis for questioning these practices, if not seeking to put an end to them in the schools.

After meeting with eight villages on separate occasions to determine a broad list of emergent survey foci² for a wider study on caste/untouchability practices in state schools, it was decided by the RA team and PI that it might be helpful in terms of knowledge generation and student mobilization (to get past sharing of isolated incidents and move to a collective sense of the issues) to first meet only with students from 5 to 6 villages before finalizing survey categories and items on caste/untouchability

practices in the area. The wider discussion sessions with the villages helped with seeking student (grade 6–10) and parent involvement in these subsequent gatherings. Now that the SC villages were aware of the purpose of these visits, the arrival of the RA team (announced by the *bhalolok*) was met with spontaneous gatherings as dalit students and parents encouraged each other to join the circle in the community hall. This 5–6 village engagement with students and parents only helped refine the survey foci and related items, 51 in all, eventually grouped under the following themes:

- (1) water
- (2) mid-day meal (MDM)
- (3) rewards/recognition
- (4) silencing
- (5) curriculum
- (6) student relations
- (7) facilities and general supports
- (8) special events/ceremonies and
- (9) gender-caste discrimination.

These themes were the result of all-participant and RA team sharing, analysis and eventual agreement regarding exclusions and inclusions. Surveys, as understood by the team and in this research, were construed as opportunities for popular public education with potential for sociopolitical mobilization, while potentially producing a rudimentary sense of social structural patterns pertaining to caste and untouchability in schools that could prove to be of political significance for the purposes of anti-caste/untouchability related social action.

What also became abundantly clear from these community-hall survey development meetings was that the plan to proceed with the survey with groups of students and parents in attendance (15–20 per group) given that knowledge production/generation was always being linked by CRDS to the political if not cultural preference for collective (open) conversations (on any issue) and related social mobilization potential (survey process as a group process for public education), was neither practical nor ethically and politically feasible given the potential risks involved for all concerned. What's more, such an approach would more likely silence the students, if not the parents, as once GC villagers came to know about the research, they often circled these halls and gatherings and heckled them saying, for example,

What is all this nonsense. There are no caste feelings these days. Now-a-days Bauri (SCs) children can wear pants and shirts; we can sit together; we eat together in the same hotels/ restaurants; we don't know who cooks the food but we eat it; if we go by bus or auto-rickshaws, we sit together; and dalits are now sarpanches (village leaders) and samiti members – we even call them *agya* (sir) and *babu*. (RA Notes 2015)

The fact that the spatial location of SC villages (always furthest away from where the sun rises – first rays fall on GC villages before they 'touch' SC villages) is also caste-determined, made access a physical issue, if not making it difficult to ensure anonymity for the process (research) as RA teams had to pass through these villages to get to the dalit or SC villages. What is more, group engagements with an enthused bunch of dalit students often made it difficult to hear what anyone was saying as they spoke over each other in their eagerness to share incidents and personal analysis.

It was subsequently decided by CRDS, that survey data would be gathered on a student-by-student basis (with parent/s present) in household backyards by teams of two RAs (female/male). A total of 401 students contributed to the caste/untouchability practices survey which was carried out over 4 months in 2015 (and partly in 2016) during the relatively cooler months of February through April, with additional survey-related work, when required, completed once the monsoon rains had arrived in July and August. The presence of one parent (usually the mother) or both also allowed the students and the RAs to begin to bring parents into the evolving research conversation and knowledge generation and mobilization pertaining to these practices in schools. After each survey was completed, emergent cumulative trends across the survey categories were shared with the student and the parent(s), to encourage knowledge sharing, potential participation in anticipated collective social action and subsequent research participation by parents and VEC members (some parents were also VEC members) in sessions specifically held with/for them, post-student survey tabulations and documentation of mini case experiences.

RA teams spent 20–30 minutes chatting with students about their own personal experiences with casteism/untouchability growing up before beginning a more deliberate process structured by the survey categories. In villages where such discrimination was being practiced openly, examples were used to give students a sense of the theme that was being addressed in this survey engagement. This was especially important for students in the younger grades. Sometimes students were asked to consider why some of their dalit friends had dropped out of school as a way to begin these conversations (RA notes, 2015).

More so than students, parents who sat with their children during these survey engagements often expressed both anger and surprise when they learned of casteist/untouchability practices that were being exposed by their children and other dalit students in the vicinity or their village through this research, i.e., data collection, analysis and dissemination were always non-discrete and simultaneous affairs. For example, they learned that

- a total of 42% of dalit students surveyed had witnessed/experienced the practice of caste-segregated drinking provisions (water pitchers/glasses);
- only GC students were asked by teachers to serve the teachers water (to ensure that SCs did not pollute their water/glass if asked to do same) as witnessed/experienced by 80% of dalit students surveyed; and
- a total of 87% said that SC students were not allowed to take a turn to serve the MDM to students, while 77% pointed out the practice of segregated seating arrangements during the MDM. A total of 90% had noticed that serving ladles would never touch SC student's plates when they were being served.

When it came to punishing treatment by the teacher, parents were shocked and grieved to learn that their children (or SC students) were being singled out by caste and subjected to physical punishment (56% acknowledged the prevalence of this discriminatory practice) including random beatings, while 66% acknowledged the practice of teachers using caste-based humiliating language (and thwarting educational potential and ambitions, while engaging in ideological shaping of caste-class and gendered social reproductions) when punishing them:

- Being a bauri (SC-migrant/bonded menial labourers), don't try to be smart like a brahmin (GC)
- How will you understand the answer if you don't understand the question hadi (SC-scavenger, sewage disposal labourer, bamboo worker)
- The illiterates are mainly from bauri caste, as an ass is among animals
- You bauri pig! You don't know anything. You just come to school to eat the mid-day meal, is that not right?
- They call us not by our name but by 'dasa', meaning servant
- You are a dhoba (SC). You are born to wash clothes and iron. You are not supposed to study. Even if you study, you will never change your profession and your name will always be the same – DHOBA!
- Dandasi is the servant of all. You are not fit to study, why do you waste your time?
- You are a bauri girl – you will never know, even if we try to make you understand!
- Kandara girl, you should be cleaning the toilet, mopping the floor, washing vessels or watering the garden – that is what you were made for

A total of 82% felt that SC girls faced double discrimination and the most severe forms of ostracizing and humiliation based on gender and caste, including regularized forced labour in the school; being made to sit at the back of the class seating arrangement; were never asked to come to the black board nor permitted to ask questions of the teacher; denied tuition after school (spent this time cleaning and sweeping in the schools anyway); and in one SC boy's terms, 'considered the *most untouchable*'.

As more students participated in the survey process and learned that many of their friends and caste compatriots across 20 schools and 16 villages were experiencing what they (personally) knew to be the case, there was a desire to share their stories in small groups to shed more light on experiences that survey numbers were alluding to. Small (focus) group meetings of students in respective dalit villages (of 5 to up to 12 students) became opportunities to share around the emergent survey patterns, while encouraging broader conversations to encourage students to educate each other and the CRDS team about caste experiences, including micropolitical experiences with push back. These examples included physical violence in retaliation for same; vandalizing school or GC student property; *deliberate pollution via touch* of religious ritual spaces/items or food/water; and verbal/knowledge challenges in class by insisting on blurting out uninvited answers before GC students could. This process also produced data (as mini case studies) for further sharing thereby serving both, social action/public education and academic data gathering purposes. Some students expressed a desire to work more closely with the likes of BVM and similar dalit movements in the locale, to mobilize around these issues and exert political pressure on schools, VECs and the Block administration to pay heed. Others suggested a need for direct action by dalit students, parents and VEC members in concert with the Block administration and experienced dalit-advansi voluntary organizations like VICALP.

A total of 20 mini cases involving some 100 students or more in such subsequent (post-survey) student group discussions were documented and developed as a result, with an emerging consciousness among grade 6–10 students pertaining to caste-untouchability as a social phenomenon (as opposed to an isolated experience) that could be challenged as a group if wider mobilization was cultivated. They also learned

from each other through these exchanges that neither parents nor VECs, let alone schools nor teachers were taking up caste/untouchability practices seriously despite their protests (open and hidden) and micropolitical responses to such treatment. Students often stated that after raising caste/untouchability issues with their parents (mainly their mothers), they would try once more before giving up. During student sharing and case study development, students provided examples of how parents either asked them to overlook the treatment and continue their schooling regardless, while others expressed frustration around what to do about it given that they were SCs in a GC area or that they felt they would not be believed nor supported if they complained.

A *hadi* girl in grade 9 who was being berated on a daily basis for being in school with GC students who verbally and physically abused her if she so much as touched their books or pens, stated that she and SC girls were never given any academic responsibility in class but were consistently told to do menial work, cleaning and sweeping which was, as described by the teacher, reserved for them. 'I have informed my parents about these practices. They remain silent every time and insist I go to school and bear this in silence.' A *bauri* girl in grade 10 similarly explained that 'given the helplessness of my parents being *bauris*, they would always advise me to stay silent given their fear that I may be removed from the school.' A *bauri* boy in grade 8 explained to his parents that he had been physically accosted by a GC student for entering the place of worship (*mandap*), i.e., he was accused of desecrating the place of worship and chastised for sitting in front of GC students but his parents (who were SC Hindus) warned him not to repeat this and were displeased with him for entering the Puja hall. This was a perplexing response for a child who could not relate to what could ostensibly be a case of internalized caste oppression prompting such a contradictory response from his parents, if not a hopeless sense of (caste) structural limitations on any semblance of dalit agency. Or in the words of another *bauri* boy in grade 8 who perhaps understood the predicament of his parents:

As my parents are from SC background, they have been facing such discrimination since the time of their forefathers. They are also victims in community caste setting, just as we are in school. They feel weak and are not able to raise their voice in support of their son in the school. Instead, they ask me to behave properly in school with GC students and teachers. (Focus group, case study #1)

That said, a frustrated *bauri* female student says, 'I blame my parents for being SCs – the cause for all the discrimination I now have to face' (Focus group, case study #18). The awareness generated among the students through such sharing was cause for despair and possibility and above all, was an anti-caste conscious 'wake-up' call for parents who were present at these data sharing/collection moments (survey or case study/focus group discussions).

Dalit parents, many of whom were also VEC members, eventually began to request the RA team and CRDS for a forum for engagement among themselves as well. Two such sessions involving 68 dalit parents, 22 of them also VEC members, representing all the villages in the area of the research and a few from beyond, were eventually held in April 2018. One was held at a community hall at a centrally located village and the second at the CRDS premises in Gopalpur-on-the-sea, away from the villages/school zone. The move to the later venue was to ensure an uninterrupted space, if not a degree of anonymity as the first village-based meeting faced several disruptions as shared. This

secluded venue enabled the possibility for more serious discussions pertaining to what was emerging from the study (student survey/focus groups) and provided a forum for adults to discuss and share their reactions and to determine politically feasible ways forward for addressing and pushing back on this caste-humiliation, untouchability and casteism in the schools.

A male *dalit* teacher and parent registered an encapsulating response to these student experiences (documented in the survey and cases) at the first workshop as follows:

Whatever we have heard from the study are very important. This is also one education for us (parents/VEC members), i.e., *research ru jaha ame janibaku pahilu eha amo pain bohooth mahathvapurno abom skhibaro bishoyo ote*. ... Nobody bothers to find out from the kids about what is taught in school and what is happening to the education of our children (*ke bhi chinta koru nahi janiba pai ki schoolore kono para houchi*). We have forgotten our own parental duties (*ame amoro bapa mar kortobiyo bhooli jai chu*). We are saying we are earning for the future of our children but we are not making time for them now. I can see the problems of our children from both ends, as a teacher and as a parent. It is good that our friends (CRDS) have brought up these issues from our studies together. First, as parents, we have to become aware through such workshops and second, we have to free our children from all types of discrimination in school (*amo pila ko mukthi deba poribo*). (VEC-Parent workshop #1, April 2018)

Another parent adds

Today's workshop is not only a warning to us but but a wake-up call for standing together hand-in-hand irrespective of which village we belong to. I am telling you, my own children are studying in these schools and I may have given importance to their education in terms of scoring marks and day-in-and-day-out I see them going to school and have never bothered about how they are ill-treated in school. And I think my eyes have opened today (*aji mo akhi kholi chi*). Henceforth, I will ask my children about what is happening in the school beside the curriculum (*pathiyo bisoyo*). I will have to consciously ask them what is happening with them with regard to casteist practices by teachers and students. So far, I was ignoring this issue (*aprojonto moo ehaku ono dekha kothili*). (Male parent, VEC-Parent workshop #2, April 2018)

The two 5-h workshops with parents and VEC members included similar sharing, heated debates and analysis. They provided an opportunity for emotional and overt shows of *dalit* solidarity prompted by *dalit* RAs who provided historical and political context pertaining to casteism and the struggle against caste, often pointing to Dr. Bhimrao Ambedkar whose picture hung on the wall. The chant, '*jai Bhim*' (long live Bhimrao Ambedkar), was made at the commencement and conclusion of each session as overt demonstrations of a *dalit* solidarity and sense of purpose provided by the memory and invocations of this revered leader. The last session included strategizing and suggestions for what needed to be done and addressed over the next year, energizing the CRDS team to contribute towards these plans for response and anti-caste resistance. An RA sums up discussions and prompts for suggestions and directions for social action:

So by now we are all clear that there is a problem in our education system. And that our children are being ill-treated and discriminated because of their caste is a fact. You have also shared a few instances of how you have faced these issues and fought back in some places making it clear that we all need to work together to change this situation – we all

feel the need for this. Change will not happen on its own (*pariborthono nije nije hobo nahi*). We have to act for it. (Male RA, VEC-Parent workshop #2, April 2018)

Some responses which are indicative of parent and VEC member suggestions for such action include:

- This is my first experience of this type of workshop where we are talking about discrimination in the school and how our children are responding. I feel that this type of workshop should be organized at regular intervals and involve teachers, VEC members and parents. If this is going on in 20 schools, it is going on in others too for sure – we need to do this everywhere (Male parent, VEC-Parent workshop #1, April 2018).
- I am Buna (translates to 'stupid, ignorant and lazy' in casteist terms) Das. In matters of education in our village, there is no involvement from the government machinery to improve the school or the education system. We will need regular organized presence and meetings on this and other caste issues. When we find out about caste treatment against our children, we must report this in the newspapers and go to the BEO (Block Education Officer), BDO (Block Development Officer) and sub-collector and DC (District Collector) offices and demonstrate and for this, we seek the support of organizations like VICALP (Male parent, VEC-Parent workshop #1, April 2018).
- We must also seek support from other villages nearby because today it happened in our school and tomorrow it can happen in other schools also. Therefore cooperation (*sohojyo*) is a must. Organizations like VICALP must also help us develop our understanding and strategies to counter discrimination because we have faith in you – you have worked with us and you are dalits (Female parent, VEC-Parent workshop #1, April 2018).
- There are too many of our movement organizations who are working on matters on a sub-caste basis – *bauri, hadi, khodal, dandasi* – we all have to become one and sit and meet as one as frequently as we can (*ame somosthe eko hoba, eko chintha koriba, ekathi bohsiba*). Together we can take collective action to address this injustice against our children. But we need supporting hands like yours (VICALP) for this. We can do protest but we don't have reach at the upper levels of government (*oopor mongole pohoncho nahi*). Who will recognize our faces? We will just keep running here and running there but they know you (VICALP) and what you are also capable of (Female parent & VEC member, VEC-Parent workshop #2, April 2018).

An RA addresses these suggestions to bring things to a close:

If we don't step forward and leave this to our children, what we have heard about through this research will only continue because our children cannot be expected to fight this on their own while trying to study. It is not their place to have to do this but if we don't do anything and don't even listen to them, then as we have learned from the research, they will feel frustrated and angry and do things in any manner they find necessary like getting together and throwing stones at the teacher from behind a bush, breaking chairs in classes, tearing the books of GC students who harm them – this study has shown that so many responses are being carried out by them as they have devised new ways to express their anger and to protest this daily treatment.

We are happy that you have decided to come together with us today and that these workshops have stirred up our thoughts and conscience. And do take this to your respective

VECs but I would appeal to you not to become over-reactive or violent because we are trying to tackle a system that is deep rooted and as you have discussed, today, we can confront these issues within the Constitutional space which is now ours and something which was not available to our ancestors, through protest, *dharna*, submission of memorandums etc. through our organizations. We need to devise ways on how our organizations at the local level, like BVS, can play an effective role in our fight back efforts (*protihotho udyomo*). As for organizations like VICALP, we will always be there as your friends and guides. When we all come together, I am confident that our fight back will produce lasting results. (Male RA, VEC-Parent workshop #2, April 2018)

Wider circles of knowledge democratization and mobilization for social action addressing casteism/untouchability in schools: the path ahead

The student survey process and focus groups along with subsequent parent-VEC workshops, has mobilized dalits in this region while producing related academic knowledge regarding, both, publically-engaged research and prospects for knowledge democracy, mobilization and social action and knowledge specifically pertaining to caste, untouchability and resistance in schooling. These knowledge and social action engagements are currently being amplified with subsequent workshops with a dozen local social action dalit NGOs and social movements, followed by a joint session between parents-VEC members and these social action agents in the region in 2019.

The knowledge produced through these engagements to date is being channelled by parents via the VECs in the region who have the authority to speak with teachers and school administrators about such matters, while street theatre by an experienced troop of dalit artists who have done similar work with CRDS in relation to land-forest politics and around anti-dispossession struggles will spread the message in and beyond the research zone. Orchestrated pamphlet-ing of villages before panchayat meetings are also part of some of the social actions under way. Two documentaries, one on caste/untouchability practices in schools and another discussing and demonstrating possible avenues for push back and anti-caste resistance taken by students, parents/dalit villages, VECs, dalit social action NGOs and dalit social movements are also being developed and produced by a young dalit graduate in communication and media studies who is from the area. Screenings of the same in villages will be used in the future to magnify the scope and impact of this work. A book project in the vernacular and for the English press are also under way to speak to this experience, i.e., dissemination as understood in relation to funded academic research.

Caste research as knowledge democracy, mobilization and social action: concluding insights and contributions to the conversation

This concluding section considers some possible insights and contributions to the conversation on research and/as knowledge democracy, mobilization and social action based on this caste research and similar research experiences pertaining to adivasi-dalit (anti-dispossession) struggles over land, forests, water and wages/working conditions as migrant/landless labour over the past two decades (Kapoor, *in press*).

Knowledge democracy in contexts of injustice and exploitation would need to recognize that knowledge about education, social in/justice, inequality, resistance and

social revolutionary/radical change is not the preserve of academics and that those who experience marginalization are knowledge producers and actors in such cross-locational engagements, including activists from these contexts. This also means recognizing the significance of varied knowledge projects based on different *epistemic* and cultural starting points, traditions and politico-theoretical commitments and this while seeking to address political-economic and sociocultural injustice, including the knowledge impacts (e.g. erasures) of an Euro-American geo-politics of colonial capitalist relations being reproduced in the name of knowledge democracy. Funded academic research engagements, including this caste research, remain contradictory prospects at best on all these counts (e.g. attempts to reinterpret and re-embed 'survey' work in local epistemologies driven by local socio-political priorities). This is predictably and partially due to limits produced and imposed by funded academic research forays embedded in and emergent from imperial centres which paradoxically can also facilitate prospects for mobilizing against casteism and untouchability in these locales..

Based on two decades of long-term research and applied engagement in the same location, it is increasingly apparent that there is a politically qualified radical democratic demand for accountable academic research *by, with* and *for* colonized, exploited, oppressed and actively marginalized social groups and classes and their socio-political agents (e.g. social movements and social action NGOs). This in turn often underscores the continuing need for academic researchers (despite the contradictions and paradoxes of epistemic and socio-cultural and political/class-caste location) to play a politically and culturally *appropriate part* in *social action* and solidarity (a partial-impartial praxis) seeking to overthrow social structures reproducing material and cultural injustices (e.g. caste). The cues for in/appropriate roles are sometimes decipherable, despite professional ethical commitments/requirements and funding agency stipulations that could well contradict any such possibility or what is/not permitted, from what those engaged in the context stipulate or not. These are usually learned through numerous interactions, including several errors in judgment over time. Such cross-locational micro-transgressions remain an integral if not necessary part of a continued and sometimes fraught process of collective praxis, compelled and necessitated none-the-less by the wider demand for collective struggle to address ongoing structural exploitation, marginalization, humiliation and oppression.

When taken together, the above demands are more likely to be met in long-term research engagements and where (political) risks for the social groups concerned and the researcher are minimized when joint action (scale) is conceivable, given the combined collective commitment of several popular actors/organized agents (e.g. students, parents, VECs, social action NGOs and dalit movements). This approach to research continually blurs *academic lines* often imposed by an institutional ethics or funding criteria that may be culturally and politically at odds with or far removed from the exigencies of the context of engagement; between research and activism; and knowledge generation and KMb, continually resisting such artificial or imposed bifurcatory constructions. This could be cause for anxiety for any researcher embarking on such work, while trying to adhere to professional requirements which problematically but predictably perhaps, assume an apolitical (read as: *hegemonic*) stance. That said, knowledge democratization and KMb requirements today also open up political prospects for continuous re/definition of the meaning of these *innovations* and related boundaries in the

name of what is professionally possible or as untested feasibilities around say what constitutes civic/public engagement and citizenship related *impacts, output and results*.

In closing, it needs to be recognized that research exclusively tethered to the production of knowledge *about/on* (or a science of) and explicitly for incestuous academic consumption if not the myopic pursuit of continuous theoretical tweaking, augmentation and ornamentation for its own sake, as if getting the theory right (what would this mean anyway?) will *really and finally* address a social structural injustice such as caste/untouchability, would likely contradict conceptions of research as knowledge democracy as/for social action. That said, theoretical work which (can) informs social action in the context of engagement (e.g. social reproduction and resistance theories re-caste, gender, education and labour in the caste project – see Paik 2014) are politically productive when made accessible (knowledge democracy as intelligibility vis-a-vis affected social groups and subaltern classes) and deployed in popular education.

The renewed and repeated call for knowledge democracy, mobilization and action research in education to address matters of social structural in/justice while acknowledging the risks to all concerned (Rowell 2017, 2018; this issue) is made necessary by the continued penetration of globalizing colonial capitalist ruling relations within academia, knowledge projects (research) and in determining whose interests will be served (Jordan 2003; Jordan and Kapoor 2016; Kapoor and Jordan 2009a). As pointed out in the introduction, Indigenous research and 'Third-Worldist PAR', both in relation to different geopolitical histories and expressions of Euro-American colonialism and activist research engagements in working-class/migrant labour movements fighting back against colonial capital, have always been informed by conceptions and practices of socio-cultural and political-economic democracy, including knowledge democracy. These enduring traditions are compelled to reiterate such mundane foundational commitments when dominant colonial capitalist Euro-American conceptions of research and knowledge production strain to establish allegedly similar democratic credentials, while predictably persisting with a hegemonic politics of co-optation, obscurantism and (re)colonial capitalist penetration.

Notes

1. The author acknowledges the financial support of the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada (SSHRC), Insight Grant program for facilitating this research partnership and project on 'Untouchability, Casteism and Schooling in Rural India: Exploring Local Response & Resistance', with the Center for Research and Development Solidarity (CRDS), a dalit-advansi (Scheduled Caste & Tribes) popular research organization in Gopalpur, Odisha, India.
2. An initial list was prepared from the literature reviewed by the PI and CRDS experience with these issues through their own work, their personal experiences as dalits who had been through the state school system and based on their experiences when working for other NGOs in the area addressing caste issues. A 'survey approach', understood as a 'non-scientific' process of popular public education and sociopolitical mobilization, was endorsed after some discussion based on its potential for social action/mobilization work (given the numbers and prospects for social engagement) and for data gathering and academic research purposes generating knowledge about caste/untouchability in schools. The term 'survey' was selected to satisfy institutional and academic demands for recognizable methods but was largely understood by the team and participants as a chance to chat and share experiences with a large number of participants on their own terms, while recognizing a mobilization approach to 'surveying' (non-scientific or what Paik 2014, 333 refers to as so-called 'trivial sources') as being socio-culturally and politically productive.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

Funding

This work was supported by the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada.

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